A True Police Adventure
By Cecil Clark

IT was READY TO KILL

Inspr. Gordon Grant gathered together a special squad to tackle the situation. They were Detectives Joe Morrison, Fred White, A. M. Stewart, J. Copland and Ben Coultas.

It was a break for the investigators when they found a pedestrain had taken the number of the getaway car in the Crystal Dairy stickup; he told police when he saw, from the street, two armed men taking money out of the till he figured they were payroll guards taking away the payroll. How he could figure they were doing it at half past 10 on a Sunday night with hoods over their heads, is rather hard to understand. The car was found and its owner proved to be in the clear; the car itself revealed a small clue that led Coultas and Copland to a room in the 1500 block, Victoria Drive. It was a darkened room and stretched out on two beds were Edward Miller, alias Irving La Pierre, and Ray Sims, alias Ronald E. Seabrook. They had $190 on them. Later an automatic pistol anda sawed off shotgun were turned up.

With this in mind, no wonder Inspr. Grant was disturbed the next evening. At 9.45 p.m. the Cambie Street radio despatcher informed his listeners that two hooded bandits had just stuck up the Kingsway Pharmacy!

According to proprietor P. G. Thomson, he and a lone woman customer were herded into a back room, while one of the hooded men took $3.50 from the till. The sum was small because late closing retailers were starting the nightly custom of emptying the cash register every hour. The bandit's car must have swept eastward clear across town, for 30 minutes later Wing Lung at 340 Keefer Street found himself looking into the muzzle of a gun held by one of two hooded bandits. They got $2. Curious fact was that in both robberies, one man carried an automatic and the other a sawed-off shotgun!

Next day, detectives cast furiously about in Vancouver's underworld for a clue, any sort of clue. But no one, not even their most reliable source, could point a finger in the right direction. Night came again, and as the hours wore on came a call from Guya Yada, Japanese storekeeper at 3390 East Hastings. It was 9.30, he said, when two hooded armed men walked in on him, shoving him and his wife, two patrons and his son, Hido, to the rear before tapping the till for $60, and picking up $10 from a shopper's purse. They drove off in a waiting car.

Half an hour later they struck again; this time across town in Kerrisdale. At 3591 West 41st, I. G. Trash, proprietor of the Southlands Pharmacy, was slightly wide-eyed when two spectral characters entered his premises, one with an automatic, the other with a shotgun. There was no money in the till, but they found it in Trash's pocket . . . $30. Customers said the car roared off in a northerly direction on Dunbar.

ON WEDNESDAY night there was a repeat performance; this time it was Mitchell's Drugstore at 2601 East Hastings. The holdup men took $25 and half an hour later they walked in on R. L. Watson, proprietor of Watson's Drug, 4105 Fraser, where they only got $5. Again someone took the licence number before the car disappeared, again it was found. It belonged to a man called Morrow who'd reported it stolen earlier in the evening.

Thursday night it was the same story; first they struck a pharmacy in the east end, then whipped across town to stick up a small grocery in West End Cardero Street. Variation came an hour later when a lone bandit tried to hold up the Capitola Service Station at Bute and Davie; Clarence Sibbell, operator on duty, saw the masked gunman climb out of his car, and quick-wittedly locked the door and called the police. The persistent holdup man banged at the door before disappearing. The bandit car, reported stolen, was found later abandoned in the 900 block West Hastings. It was agreed that this was a lone wolf effort, unconnected with the hooded organization.

Friday night the city police were out in double strength, but the only significant incident was a gun battle on East Hastings. It happened when Louis Minichiello, 22, and a companion objected to police questioning and drove off in a hurry; they exchanged shots with the pursuing police car and finally, outdistancing the police, the car was found in the 1200 block Franklin. Louis was brought in next day to explain his brusque attitude.

Came Saturday night, every police detail still specially briefed for an all-out effort. The hooded gentry were bound to strike and Chief of Police Foster took a personal hand in the J. W. McKinnon, cruising the Fairview district.

THINGS SEEMED ominously quiet as scores of police cars listened during the evening to minor calls about drunks, fires and fights. Now and again came word of some unimportant fender bending, auto accident. It was at 10.20 that Cambie Street despatcher told a laconic story of two holdups, one involving two hooded men, at Boundary Road and East Hastings, right at the east end of the city limits. The other stickup, in the west end, was the work of a single, unmasked youth. The East End job was the important one and according to Chief Foster's figuring the bandits might just return to the city in a wide sweep that would bring them in through South Granville. It was lucky reasoning, for as Foster and McKinnon drifted through the 2500 block South Granville, suddenly they spotted a swiftly approaching car with three men in it.

"After them!" snapped the chief, and in seconds the constable driver was moving the speedometer needle up to 50, then 60, then 70. Then came a crackle of shots and stabs of flame from the car ahead. Foster returned the fire, and for answer a shot starred the police windshield and another ploughed into the radiator. The issue was suddenly decided when the car ahead slewed violently, struck the curb and almost turned over. Its three occupants hit the ground running, and as the police car slid to a tire-screeching halt, Foster and McKinnon, gun in hand, took up the chase on foot.

The trio separated and McKinnon took after two of them, down an alley between buildings. Foster took after his man through a patch of brush. There were shots exchanged, and McKinnon downed one of his men with a bullet in the leg. The other disappeared over a fence. Quickly the constable noted the wounded man was in no danger, and handcuffing him around the ankles went to help his chief.

During the mile-a-minute chase Foster had flashed the alarm by radio and given his position. Now other cars arrived but a search of the bush showed only that the criminal had vanished.

Next day a check of city hospitals proved negative.

McKinnon's wounded captive proved to be Elmer Almquist, 24, who had still around his neck what appeared to be a black stockinette muffler. Pulled up over his face it proved to be a cowl-like hood, with eye holes. Next day, checking around the underworld haunts, detectives found a second member of the gang, William Gates. He was found in a room at 241 East Third. Both he and his injured companion were charged with auto theft and robbery with violence.

From what the police could learn, only one member of the syndicate was at large. But he was an important member, the man who planned it all. Sunday was quiet so far as holdups were concerned; then on Monday came the final act in the story of Vancouver's hooded bandits.

Ronald Holdsworth, the one man still at large, was sitting in the Patricia Hotel beer parlor at the corner of Dunlevy and Hastings, late that afternoon. Morose and frustrated, the Montreal Kid somehow or another took exception to waiter Benny Wainborn, who kept passing him without taking his order. When Bennie, tray in hand, passed once more, Holdsworth picked off the tray a bottle of beer and an empty glass. As the waiter remonstrated, there appeared in Holdsworth's eyes that dangerous, uneasy flicker.

Ed Mulhern, the bar tender, thought he saw trouble coming and headed for the phone. Holdsworth anticipated the move by drawing his gun and slamming a shot into the plaster above Mulhern's head. Waiter Wainborn, with perhaps more courage than sense, advanced on the truculent, armed customer to order him out. With cold calculating savagery Holdsworth pushed the gun muzzle into Wainborn's stomach and pulled the trigger . . . and the cartridge misfired!

POCKETING THE GUN in disgust, the young desperado turned on his heel and walked out into the street. Mulhern followed, first cautiously peeking through the door, then he stepped out on the pavement. Down the block he glimpsed the young gunman entering a Japanese confectionery. In a flash Mulhern was at the phone, and seconds later the Cambie Street despatcher was intoning: "In a Jap confectionery, on Dunlevy near Hastings, a man with a gun, there now . . ."

Nearest police car was a block away, driven by Const. R. A. Slattery, who was teamed up with Const. Neil McLeod. In a minute or so they were in front of the confectionery and when Slattery stepped into the store, gun in hand, he found himself looking at the back of a man who was demanding money from a diminutive Japanese.

Slattery's snappy, "Drop that gun and reach for the ceiling" was Holdsworth's cue to whirl, and shoot.

The bullet caught Slattery's cap just above the peak, whisking it off his head. A split second later the answering blast from Slattery's gun caught the gunman in the stomach.

A helpless look spread over the young bandit's face, his gun slowly fell from his grasp, then clasping his hands over his stomach he fell forward on his face.

It was the police radio centre that had the last word; on Neil McLeod's call the Cambie Street operator acknowledged the news with the addition, "ambulance on its way."

Holdsworth's life hung in the balance for a day or two then slowly he recovered—recovered to face justice.

From his hospital bed he confessed to masterminding the holdup details.

One he didn't relate was caught up by observant Inspr. Grant. Going through the worth's watch when something about it struck a chord of memory. It's description matched one stolen August 30 when a man and his girl friend were held up in a car in Stanley Park. Robbed of money, jewelery and their auto, the pair were taken by the lone bandit to Kitsilano Indian Reserve, there tied up and deserted. Both victims subsequently identified Holdsworth.

That November, Judge Harper in County Court gave Holdsworth a little advice . . . and five years for shooting at bartender Mulhern! It was the following spring, however, that the young visitor from Montreal learned that he would be at the coast for some time. For a variety of charges or armed robbery Chief Justice Aulay Morison added another 13 years.

As all the sentences ran consecutively, it made Ronald's stay at the coast exactly 18 years!

His companions in crime all drew major sentences.

After that there was a lull in Vancoruver's East End—but not for long!